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Candour and Confidentiality: Textual Criticism of Two Greek Letters on Anglo-Burmese Relations, 1838

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British policy in Burma following the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–26) has been studied in Professor Walter Sadgun Desai's *History of the British Residency in Burma, 1826–1840*¹⁾ and more recently by D. G. E. Hall in *Henry Burney: A Political Biography*.²⁾ Both utilized the India Office Archive *official* collections and demonstrated the half-hearted British attempts to maintain the provisions of the Treaty of Yandabo and an official British presence in Burma. In a palace coup of April 1837, Tharrawaddy replaced his elder brother Bagyidaw on the throne. There is some circumstantial evidence that the British resident, Burney, had unsuccessfully supported Bagyidaw against the usurper. Tharrawaddy's court maintained an anti-British policy. The difficulties the British envoys labored under included harassment, insult, stopping of mail and supplies, and spying. Each humiliation was inflicted without British remonstrance and fed Burmese confidence in their policy of unilateral brinkmanship. Colonel Henry Burney left in ill health and under a cloud for his role in the 1837 coup. He was succeeded successively by Col. G. T. Bayfield, Col. R. Benson and William McLeod before the Government of India authorized complete withdrawal in 1840.

The two letters reproduced here from the Prinsep collection demonstrate the value of private Mss in the imperial decision making process.

Richard Benson (1785–1858) typified the India Army military man whose ambition led him into the political department. His superior service from 1806 was capped by his appointment as Military Secretary to the Governor General, William Bentinck, from 1828 to 1833. Following furlough he was appointed Resident to Ava from June 1838 to March 1839. The recipient of these two letters was Henry Thoby Prinsep (1793–1878) of the Bengal Civil Service, historian, administrator, mathematician, and classicist of some note. Benson and Prinsep no doubt met and befriended each other in Calcutta between 1828 and 1833 when Prinsep was Secretary to the General Department. His reference to Colonel [James] Stuart in the letter of 16 November is probably to a mutual acquaintance, then Deputy

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1) Rangoon, University of Rangoon, 1939.

2) London, Oxford University Press, 1974.

MS. D. 662/C

Amarapoura Nov. 7 1838

My dear Prinsep

For conveyance to Rangoon
this will be put into the hands of the
helmsman of a mercantile boat.
I am unwilling therefore to confide to
this sheet more than the following words
Εμοι πάντα πολεμου πλεον φαίνεται, οτι
εχθρος εσται ημεις ο βασιλευς, και παρ
του βασιλεως ουδεις προς ημας ερχεται..
Ευ γαρ ιστε, οτι εις αγωνα ερχεσθε.

This, recollect, is merely my opinion,
which I have endeavoured perhaps unsuc-
cessfully, to put into comprehensible terms.

Most truly, &c
R. Benson

Letters are from Prinsep Papers, D662/C and are reproduced by courtesy of the Director of the India Office Library and Records, London.

Amarapoura Nov. 7 1838
My dear Prinsep
For conveyance to Rangoon
this will be put into the hands of the
helmsman of a mercantile boat.
I am unwilling therefore to confide to
this sheet more than the following words.
*Everything seems to me to be infected by war,
the king will be hostile to us, and
no one from the king comes near us.*
For you know well that you are heading for a struggle.
This, recollect, is merely my opinion,
which I have endeavoured, perhaps unsuc-
cessfully, to put into comprehensible terms.
Most sincerely yours
R. Benson

MS. No. D. 662/C

My dear Prinsep -
 I will not dis-
 guise that we would like
 to go home, for owing to
 the frequent menace which
 they are subject, *οι παῖδες οἱ*
δουλοὶ ἡμῶν κομιζοῦσιν ἐν
κινδυνῷ εἶναι.
 By the way in my last
 sorry attempt at this tongue
 I put *ἡμεῖς* for *ἡμῖν*.
 The *servants* are certainly
 off their poise and do not

16 Nov

My dear Prinsep

I will not dis-
 guise, that *we would like*
to go home, for owing to
 the frequent menace which
 they are subject, *all our servants*
consider themselves to be
in danger.

By the way in my last
 sorry attempt at this tongue
 I put *ἡμεῖς* for *ἡμῖν*.*

The *servants* are certainly
 off their poise and do not

* *ἡμεῖς* = we (nominative plural)
ἡμῖν = to (or 'for') us (dative plural)

relish catching tartars -
Jack - I have caught a tartar!
Tom - Bring him along -
Jack - He won't come -
Tom - Come yourself -
Jack - He won't let me -
Nil desperandum -
We are not yet in the gin,
and blindness to the future
is kindly given.
All in good health -
Ever siny yrs
R. Benson

This goes by an Arme-
nian -
Pray send my regards
to Col. Stuart.

relish catching tartars
Jack-I have caught a tartar
Tom-Bring him along
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Secretary in the Military Department. While it was not unusual for officials to write privately, in this instance it takes on particular importance for Prinsep served as Secretary to the Government of India in the General, Foreign, and Financial Departments, and on two occasions officiated as Secretary in the Secret and Political Departments, at the time that Benson was in Burma.

Benson was 800 miles across the Bay of Bengal and 300 miles up the Irrawaddy. Four months might elapse between his querying Calcutta and receiving an answer. During these tense times Tharrawaddy's harassment of Benson included questioning his credentials to succeed Burney, prohibiting visitors, threatening translator Edwards and jailing residency servants. The Burmese opened mail packets in search of smuggled bullion and precious stones. Benson concluded that the "King thinks I am ordered to submit to anything and thinks he is the whip hand."³⁾

The two letters evoke an abject tone of fear related unofficially to Calcutta. Benson took a bolder line in his official correspondence. Benson wanted to keep his gnawing doubts about personal safety and the mission's morale from Tharrawaddy's eyes. He had not as yet received the chemicals for invisible ink nor a code book. Rather than write *en clair*, he resorted to the common denominator of the English nineteenth century gentleman's classical education—Greek. Prinsep was Benson's friend and could be relied upon to discreetly support him without making him appear cowardly. These letters were circulated by Prinsep to Governor General Auckland and his Council. Auckland noted in a minute on Burmese affairs that "Benson's journal is far more pleasing than the tenor of his letter."⁴⁾ Calcutta was sympathetic to Benson's position but being immersed in Afghan troubles would take no action to support its agents on the opposite and less strategic northeast frontier. Based on demiofficial correspondence the President in Council authorized withdrawal without reference to further orders and transmitted a cipher.⁵⁾

Benson's fears stood a good chance of being exposed to the Burmese as the helmsman and Armenian carrying the letters were roughly versed in Hindi, English, Burmese, and Greek, and were probably double agents employed by King Tharrawaddy. Benson never did receive an audience with Tharrawaddy. He found, like Burney, that Calcutta would make no demonstration against mistreatment of British representatives at Amarapoor. And like Burney, Benson's letters soon complained of ill health. He withdrew from the capital in 1839.

3) Benson to Prinsep, 9 October 1838, Prinsep Papers D662/6, India Office Archives, London.

4) Minute of 13 January 1839 in Auckland Papers, Add. Mss. 37694, British Museum, London.

5) Prinsep to Benson, draft, early November 1838, Prinsep Papers, D662/6.